

Jane, murmuring with touching earnestness the first words she had uttered for several days; "why should I grieve, for am I not going too? many and many a day you have led me by the hand, and the Good Shepherd will let me walk by your side in Paradise."

"Jane! Jane!" exclaimed the widow rising from her pillow, with passionate energy, and fixing her eyes on those of her stricken child with a power that recalled the wandering intellect flickering through them; "listen to me! there is a weight upon my soul which causes it to faint on its passage through the gates of death. It is on yours, too, poor child, and if the command of the dying cannot remove it, your young head will, indeed, be brought to the grave. You understand me, Jane? Thank God! thank God! she is herself again!"

She clasped the hands of Jane, with hers, and, for a moment, drew her to her breast.

"Now, dear child," she resumed, "bring me here the scarf which Lewis left you as his last love token. The truth is written upon it which, in your blessed love for me, you have smothered in your poor heart till it is almost broken."

The scarf was brought and laid upon the bed covering. The dying woman unfolded it with trembling hands, and pointed to the mark which had wrought the fulfillment of her own destiny, while Jane started back appalled and shuddering at the sight.

"That," she continued, "through the strange working of Providence, revealed to me what my weak, human nature has not been able to bear. Do not answer me, for my time is precious, and I need to have nothing explained; but when I have gone to the place where the guilt and sorrow of this world shall trouble me no more, let no thought of me prevent you from telling all that is on your mind of the cruel crime that has destroyed the happiness of your young life. It goes hard with me—oh how hard!—to lay this charge upon you, but it must not be that the good perish, even in this world, and the wicked be allowed to triumph safely in his sin. Now God's grace be with you, my darling Jane, for having been nothing but a joy and a blessing to me until this shadow fell upon us both!—don't cry, darling, let me think of Heaven—you will soon have your conscience pure from the knowledge that defiles it; there, fold your pretty hands as you did when I first taught you to pray, and let our supplications go together before me to the throne of God!"

Jane felt none of the agony of grief. She folded her pale hands, and leaning forward, rested her fair head against the bosom which had never throbbed for her but in tenderness, and thus, wrapt in prayer, she remained, until its coldness warned her that its pulsations had ceased forever.

The general sympathy for the bereaved girl was redoubled. Every office of kindness and protection that her situation required was proffered to her, but though she received each expression of good feeling with meek thankfulness, her answers were often accompanied by the melancholy presentiment, "I shall not trouble any one long." Though it was remarked, and with surprise, by the neighbors, that her new affliction had removed instead of increasing her mental disorder, yet all, with native prudence and delicacy, abstained from alluding in her presence to the tragical event which still was hourly discussed and deplored.

It was soon, however, decided where Jane was to find an asylum, at least, during the early period of her mourning. Immediately after the death of the widow, Sheriff Merrill, who had been nominated as an executor of her will, while an occupant of an adjoining farm, made his appearance, and begging her to consider him her guardian, offered his house as her home. Without hesitation she acceded to his proposal.

Preparation was made for conducting the funeral of the widow with every mark of respect to her memory which her many virtues demanded. A notification of her demise was sent to her son, who was known to be in N—, and on the morning of the third day, when the company had collected to attend the body to the grave, he presented himself among them. He was attired in a handsome suit of mourning, and wore upon his countenance every proper sign of sorrow. The coffin was not yet closed when he entered the house, and Jane sat at its head, her tears, for the first time, dropping fast from her colorless cheeks upon the beloved face she was to see no more. George Slade advanced toward her with expressions of brotherly greeting, and to those around them it was startling to witness the change which came over the afflicted young creature at his approach. Her white lips shrunk and quivered, her eyes dilated and grew dim with some emotion which none could define, and bending forward in her seat, she covered her face with her hands, as if to exclude some external object from her view. The bold

man seemed not to have perceived her agitation. He looked calmly at the corpse, accounted briefly for the delay of his arrival, and expressed himself ready that the solemn rites should begin.

The concourse of people assembled was very large, and was composed of all classes of the community, for the widow had been honored equally by high and low. The church-yard was at but an easy walking distance, and thither they proceeded on foot. The body was lowered into the grave close beside where the young pastor had been so recently laid, and in the address which followed, a simple and feeling allusion was made to the affection, as of mother and son, which had subsisted between the two in life, and to the mingling of their dust in death. As the service closed, Jane withdrew from the arm of Sheriff Merrill by which she had been supported, having repulsed that offered by George Slade as the procession left the house, and knelt silently by the grave. She was allowed to remain undisturbed until the coffin was hidden by the first layer of fresh clouds, and then George, to whom the duty seemed with propriety to belong, stepped forward to draw her away. She elevated her hands for a moment as if in prayer, and then fixed her eyes upon him with an expression of solemn rebuke, which none who beheld it could ever afterward forget. His countenance changed, but, as he retreated to his place, he quickly concealed it with the white handkerchief, which he had been using with the lugubrious gestures suitable to the occasion.

"Help me, O Father! to relieve my soul of the burthen which, in thy mysterious will, has been cast upon it!" such were the words, which in broken murmurs were heard to escape from the lips of Jane, and arising from her knees, she added, in loud, clear tones, as if her adjuration had won her the strength she invoked; "stand forward, George Slade!—here above the dust of him whose blood was spilt by your hand, I pronounce you a murderer!"

The handkerchief dropped from the grasp of George, and his face grew ashy pale; but commanding his voice, he said, in his blandest tones, "Poor girl! poor girl! her mind is still unsettled!"

"Not so, George Slade," responded Jane, in the same manner of lofty resolution which sent conviction at once to those who, all their life, had known her timid and truthful character; "my mind did, indeed, fall me for a time, for, trained as it was to fear the commandments of my Maker, how could it remain firm under the secret knowledge of a crime so black and grievous?—when I knew that to betray it would send to the grave the being I loved more dearly than my own life?—but now it is restored to me with a power it never before possessed, and in good season to work out the retribution which a just Judge demands, and I repeat the words which I never could have spoken while her body, even though lifeless, was upon the earth—I accuse you, George Slade, of the murder of Lewis Walton!"

The guilty man looked wildly about, and moved backward a few paces through the crowd, but when he felt the strong arm of the sheriff upon him, and saw that the assemblage pressed closely round, he knew that it was as impossible to escape as it would be vain to resist, and made a show of voluntarily surrendering himself a prisoner.

The sensation created by the scene in the church-yard fully equalled that following the discovery to which it was consequent. The most anxious curiosity prevailed throughout the county, for the details which had been expected from Jane, were, according to the advice of Sheriff Merrill, reserved for himself, and for such functionaries as were requisite to prosecute the case. Yet notwithstanding this precaution to prevent any unfavorable bias of the public mind against the accused, his conduct since he had appeared in the country had been so reprehensible, and the character of Jane was so much above suspicion, that no one seemed to have a doubt of his guilt. Even had it been otherwise, a new and unexpected testimony, corroborating her assertion, would have gone far to settle the question. The blood-stained handkerchief found with the key of the parsonage, was identified by a storekeeper of N—, as one which he had sold to the reputed criminal, a few days preceding the murder.

The prison to which George Slade had been consigned, was the architectural boast of the district to which it pertained and, in its size, strength and costliness, corresponded rather with the wealth of the community that had erected it, than with their well deserved reputation for sobriety and good morals. It stood at some distance from the village where the courts were held, and, based upon a perpendicular mass of rock of great height and boldness, it looked with its mural ornaments, not an imperfect imitation of some castellated fortress or guard tower of feudal times. At the foot of the bluff was the residence of Sheriff Merrill for he had obtained permission to occu-

py a pretty tenement there situated with its gardens and pasture lots, a part of the public domain, instead of the suite of apartments allotted to the incumbent of his office within the prison walls; though to them he had ready access by a flight of steps rudely cut in the precipice and terminating at a minor entrance, which was ordinarily used in preference to the grand gateway facing the village.

Amidst the comforts of his quiet and pleasant home poor Jane found a kindly welcome, but neither the fatherly attentions of the good sheriff, the gentle sympathy of his wife, nor the cheerful society of his young family, ever banished, for a moment, her mournful dejection. Her bodily health soon gave way under her mental suffering, and though no complaint ever escaped her lips, and she was still able to move about the house performing such little domestic duties as she fancied, she declined so fast that it was feared she might not survive until the term of court, during which she was to act so conspicuous a part. The thought of a human life dependent upon the word of this frail woman seemed ever present in her mind. She would gaze silently upon the grated windows of the jail and turn chilled and trembling away. So distressing had the subject become to her after the conference with her legal advisers, which followed her public accusation, that it was necessary to avoid it in her presence.

Meanwhile George Slade had preserved his reckless bearing, boldly asserting the continued insanity of Jane, and professing to treat the evidence of the handkerchief, of which he had been informed, as one of those strange coincidences for which there is no accounting. But when the time of trial was near at hand his demeanor changed. He became restless and morose, and on the evening of the day preceding that on which the session of the court was to commence, he was remarked by the subordinate, whose duty it was to see the prisoners secured, and to deliver the keys to the sheriff, pacing his cell with a pale face and his brow contracted as if from pain.

That night came upon him the utmost agony of terror at the fate which seemed inevitable. Midnight found him still busy with the troubled meditations that allowed him no thought of rest. The light of the broad, full moon lay silvery white upon the floor, checkered with the shadow of the heavy grating, that would have made hope of escape a dream of madness. He walked to the window it secured and opened the sash to catch the cool breath of the autumnal air, and he clenched with painful force the rusty bars, as if to vent in physical action the uneasiness of his spirit. Suddenly his eye fell upon an object moving in the shade cast by the wall into the jail-yard. It advanced into the moonlight, and presented the outlines of a female form, but so spectral with its white dress and gliding step, that his flesh crept with a sensation of superstitious dread. It paused opposite to his window, and for an instant a thin, pale hand was raised, and a death-like face turned toward him. The gesture must have been intended for his eye, for of the few inmates of the prison, he was the only one occupying that side of the building. How could any living being find entrance into that strong inclosure? He drew his hand across his eyes to clear his vision, and when he removed it the strange visitant was gone. He tried to assure himself that in his excited state, an illusion had deceived him, yet he leaned his face close to the bars to be satisfied that it had quite disappeared. But now his ear could not be mistaken; there was a sound, scarcely more distinct than his own breathing, at the door of his cell, and that of a key applied to the lock. The hinges faintly creaked, and the same unearthly figure stood in the doorway, in strong relief against the darkness beyond. The moonlight shone full into the large sunken eyes, and upon the long, fair locks that had escaped from the snowy head-covering, and he doubted, scarcely less than before, the evidence of his senses, that it was Jane.

Without giving him time to recover himself, she stepped backward into the passage, and whispering the single monosyllable "Come!" she beckoned him to follow her. Hardly conscious of his own movements he obeyed, and guided by the moonbeams, which through the open door, faintly lighted a long vista, felt himself breathing the free air once more. The tremulous hands of Jane fell to her side as she attempted to turn the key in the massive lock of the entrance door, signing George to secure it, she preceded him to the gate from which the steps descended.

"Why, Jane, Jane—that's a brave girl!" he exclaimed, for the first time feeling his liberty was real, when he stood on the bare rocks with the gate barred behind him; "this timely rescue will make me forget all the injury you have done me, and I shall love you better than ever! you have proven that you are my friend, at last."

"No, no, George Slade! do not for a

moment believe that what I have done is for your sake!" responded Jane, with nervous rapidity; "for nothing less than her memory could I have acted this base part toward the good man, who would have cherished me among his own children, her whose last hour was hurried on by your wickedness, and filled with the bitterness of earthly grief instead of the triumph which should have ended her saintly life.—With her dying breath she bade me make known the dreadful secret that clouded my soul, and I obeyed; but when it was done, all that you had been to her returned to my mind. I remembered that in her early days of trouble, she had poured upon you all the tenderness of her nature, that you were the only thing in the world that could gladden her heart. I remembered how fondly, forgetting all your late unworthiness, she used to talk of your childish ways, and to tell how much dearer you became for every trial she endured for your sake and I could not, Oh! I could not bear the thought, that by my means any thing she had so loved should perish! I remembered how careful she was of her good name, that no stain should rest upon it—not through worldly pride—but that not a scoff, for her error, should fall upon the faith she professed, and I could not endure to think, that, as borne by her son, it should go abroad, blackened by a most hideous crime, and be preserved with the record of a shameful death. Oh! it is for her memory I have done this!—that I deceived the kind confidence of my protector, watching every word and action that could show me how you could be set free. My brain almost grew wild again, George Slade, when I crept into his chamber, where I had always been trusted as freely as a child of his own, and stole from it like a base thief, these instruments of your release! but go! go! all that will be left for me in this world, is to confess this deed, to be accused of falsehood and ingratitude—at best, to be dealt with as a maniac, and then to die!"

"But, Jane why should that be?—withdraw your charge against me; deny the truth of what, it will be readily believed, you uttered from a deranged mind, and you may go again to your old home and be happy."

"Happy!—happy in sight of the ground that I saw wet with his blood!—here, at every step, I would fancy her eyes looking after me in pity for my load of sin!—man, man, it is you who are mad!"

"Yes, Jane, you may be happy, why not?—the heaviest loss can be forgotten, if we take heart to bear it bravely. Could my mother look back, would she not rather see you keeping down useless sorrow, and making the best of your life?—had Lewis Walton thought he should die in his bed and leave you a widow, could he have reasonably asked, that, with your beauty and young feeling you should remain so?—no, no, Jane you could be happy yet, and might make me so. In the home my mother's labor earned by her, we might spend our days together, for, if you would, you could love me as well as you did Lewis Walton."

"Love you, George Slade!—God knows how hard I strive not to hate you with a hatred equal to my horror of your utter wickedness."

"Lower your voice, Jane, and answer me truly," said George assuming an air of regretful concern; "do you, indeed believe me guilty of the act of which you accused me? though, through my love for you, I felt no grief for the death of one I looked upon as a rival, and did not affect it, could you really have thought that I had taken his life?"

"Did I not see you do all but plunge the weapon into his heart?" exclaimed Jane; "did I not see you spring upon him like a wild beast, and see your arm fell him to the earth? did I not see you drag his body to where you thought it could lie, without betraying you to the world, which has no tortures terrible enough for the crime?—did I not bear upon my own person the print of your guilt which sent your mother to the grave?" and her manner grew wild, and her voice shrill at the recapitulation.

"Hush! hush, Jane!—you will raise an alarm, your mind is wandering again poor girl!—come here into the shadow, or you will betray yourself and me;" and he stretched out his hand to draw her into the darkened recess of the gateway, for she stood in the open moonlight, and a few feet from the edge of a precipice along which the wall extended.

"Did I not see it all, and, Oh, God! I can send this man forth in safety, who had no mercy on my own!—my own! does not his spirit cry for vengeance?—yet vengeance is mine—thine, Lord!" she continued, with increased vehemence; off! off!—dare you lay that hand again on me?" and as he forcibly caught her arm, she sprang backward to escape from his grasp. For a moment she struggled, with the instinct of nature, to regain her foothold, and the next she had disappeared over the precipice.

In his surprise, I know not if I might use a stronger word, George Slade forgot

his fear of discovery. He stepped hastily to the spot from which she had fallen. He could see, far below, a heap of white drapery without form or motion. "Poor fool! she will raise her voice against me no more, no living creature could survive that tremendous fall. Poor, pretty fool!—yet I loved her as I never did any one before, and, I think, I am sorry for her now. But she is out of my way, and shall I brave this trial!—if I were sure the law would make me the heir, I would take my lodgings again within the walls. To have secured a chance of escape would be more than a trifle in my favor. I believe I'll go back—yet that handkerchief—that cursed handkerchief—it may after all, be better to fly;" and flinging the keys over the precipice, he turned his steps toward the most secluded road which led through the settlement.

The next morning the body of Jane was found caught upon a clump of arbutus in the sheriff's garden. She must have been senseless before her fall was thus broken, for the limbs hung with a relaxation that evinced neither effort nor pain. Her white dress was stained with blood, and a crimson stream which had flowed from her lips across her bosom, proved that her life had ebbed from some internal source. That her fate was connected with the escape of the prisoner no one doubted, but in what manner it could have been so, was a mystery.

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